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Some Remarks on the Correctness of Language

This article written by Professor Kazimierz Polański has been selected for the inclusion in this volume posthumously. Its Author is no longer with us thus it is important once again to go back and consider his significant contribution not only to the development of Slavonic studies in Poland and worldwide but also to general linguistics.

The ordinary user of language is interested first of all in the problem of its correctness. On thes other hand, problems of the correctness of language have tended to be neglected in what is considered to be scientific linguistics. It has been stressed that the linguist is not particularly interested in the problem of language correctness (Hockett, 1958: 5). This attitude can easily be seen also from the ways linguistics is divided. As is well known, two main types are usually distinguished within the synchronic study of language, descriptive and prescriptive linguistics.

It is pointed out that in contradistinction to prescriptive linguistics, which tries to lay down rules for how a language ought to be used, that is, which teaches how people should speak and write, scientific linguistics is held to be descriptive in nature and its aim is defined as recording the actual usage of a language, in other words, examining how people really do speak and write. The former is not customarily considered to be a scientific study of language. Its tasks are defined as purely pedagogical. This standpoint has been typical of most modern linguistics independently of its schools and directions. As Hockett puts it:

> As a *user* of language, the linguist is bound by the conventions of his society just as everyone else is — and is allowed the same degrees and kinds of freedoms within those conventions. In using language, he may be a purist or not. But this has little if any relationship to his special concern, which is *analyzing* language. As an analyst of language, the linguist is bound to observe and record "incorrect" forms as well as "correct" ones — if the language with which he is working makes such a distinction (Hockett, 1958: 5).

It has become clear only recently that the problem of the correctness of language is of great importance also from the theoretical point of view. The starting point here has been Noam Chomsky's transformational generative grammar. Chomsky defines language as "a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements" (Chomsky, 1957: 13). According to Chomsky,

> the fundamental aim in the linguistic analysis of a language L is to separate the *grammatical* sequences which are the sentences of L from the *ungrammatical* sequences which are not sentences of L and to study the structure of the grammatical sequences (Chomsky, 1957: 13).

By grammatical sentences Chomsky means well-formed sentences, that is, sentences generated in line with the rules of a given language. This is closely related to the very foundations of transformational-generative grammar. According to Chomsky, language is rule-governed and this property of it enables linguistics to aim at formalization. Formalized linguistic analysis is as explicit as possible, that is, describes linguistic facts in terms of formal rules.

Well-formedness is thought of in purely formal terms, that is, in terms of syntax. Chomsky separates grammaticality from semantics. He writes:

> the notion "grammatical" cannot be identified with "meaningful" or "significant" in any semantic sense. Sentences (1) and (2) are equally nonsensical, but any speaker of English will recognize that only the former is grammatical.
> (1) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
> (2) Furiously sleep ideas green colorless
> Similarly, there is no semantic reason to prefer (3) to (5) or (4) to (6), but only (3) and (4) are grammatical sentences of English.
> (3) have you a book on modern music
> (4) the book seems interesting.
> (5) read you a book on modem music?
> (6) the child seems sleeping.
> Such examples suggest that any search for a semantically based definition of "grammaticalness" will be futile (Chomsky, 1957: 15).

In other words, according to Chomsky, the fact that the sentence: *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously* is semantically wrong for several reasons (the meaning of one of its parts, colorless, contradicts the meaning of another part, *green*; the very nature of ideas prevents us from ascribing the predicate *sleep* to them, etc.) has nothing to do with its being grammatically well-formed.

This conforms to the theoretical assumptions of transformational-generative grammar. In keeping with this approach, grammar consists of three main compo-

nents: the syntactic component, the semantic component, and phonological component. It is the syntactic component that Chomsky regards as the generative source in a linguistic description and that is why the syntactic component is considered to be responsible for well-formedness.

Grammaticalness or well-formedness is understood as compliance with the rules of the grammar of a given language. These rules are supposed to reflect the intuitive judgement of native speakers of the language as Chomsky conceives grammar to be a mentalistic entity and treats it as a model of the linguistic competence of the fluent native speaker of the language. Grammatical sentences are claimed to be an ideal reflection of linguistic competence, that is, the native speaker-hearer's intrinsic knowledge of his language (Chomsky, 1965: 4, 18).

The actual use of language may, however, depart in various ways from the perfect model of its grammar. Therefore the generativist concept of competence is contrasted with performance, which is the actual use of language or what the speaker--hearer actually says or understands on the basis of his knowledge of a language (Chomsky, 1965: 4, 9).

In order to better account for the two aspects of the generativist approach to sentences, that is, the purely grammatical structure of idealized sentences on the one hand, and the utterances as they are used by speakers on the other hand, Chomsky introduces the notion of acceptability. He uses the term "acceptable" to refer to utterances "that are perfectly natural and immediately comprehensible without paper--and-pencil analysis, and in no way bizarre or outlandish" (Chomsky, 1965: 10).

Sentences which sound odd are not acceptable even if they are grammatically correct, for instance, sentences containing too many relative clauses, like the following one: *I met a man who has a son who wants to marry a girl who was born in the region which…*

Although Chomsky's definition of language has been considered to be one of the fundamental theses of transformational generative grammar since its origin, it has always been criticised by traditional linguists (Mey, 1993: 25—26).

Charles Hockett was probably the first to contest the Chomskyan conception of language as a rule-governed system (Hockett, 1968). Hockett claims that the issue of rule-governed behaviour is not whether or not some segment of behaviour is governed by rules, but whether the rules of the behaviour (in this case, the language behaviour) constitute a well-defined system. By a well-defined system is meant any system — for example, physical, conceptual, or mathematical — that can be completely and precisely characterized by deterministic functions. In Hockett's opinion, the rules for a human language are ill-defined (Hockett, 1968: 45, 87).

One of the first generativist authors to oppose the Chomskyan criterion of well-formedness as the decisive test by which to judge a linguistic production was George Lakoff (Mey, 1993: 25; Lakoff, 1971). As early as 1971, Lakoff points out in his article, that it would be inadequate to assume "that one can speak of the well- or ill-formedness of a sentence in isolation". According to him:

> one must speak of relative well-formedness and/or relative grammaticality; that is, in such cases a sentence will be well-formed only with respect to certain presuppositions about the nature of the world (Lakoff, 1971: 330).

In other words, in dealing with correctness we cannot disregard either semantic or pragmatic factors. Extralinguistic factors very often enter into judgements of well-formedness.

What is prescribed by grammarians as correct is often at variance with what the speakers perceive as correct. Classical examples include *ad sensum* constructions in which a noun in the singular denoting a collective body combines with a plural verb form, since the speakers perceive the semantic plurality as more essential than the prescription of the grammar to use the singular, cf. for instance: *The Board of Directors have decided not to pay dividends this year* (Mey, 1998: 27). Numerous more complex examples of this kind can be found in an excellent monograph by Corbett (1983).

Another difficulty with the Chomskyan criterion of well-formedness as the decisive standard in judging a linguistic production has to do with the access to such a subjective phenomenon as the linguistic competence of native speakers whose linguistic competence the linguist describes. For it seems obvious that it would be beyond the linguist to describe the linguistic competence of all the native speakers of a given language. The question is important as the generativists have always depreciated the role of text corpus in linguistic studies.

According to the generativist approach each linguist is supposed to depend on his own linguistic intuition and is, therefore, qualified to describe his own idiolect without regard to idiolects of other people, including the idiolects of other grammarians. Consequently, the sentences the linguist feels to be consistent with his linguistic intuition are regarded by him as grammatical in his idiolect, cf., for instance, Lakoff (1971: 332—333).

In this respect the generativists' approach seems to resemble the neo-grammarian approach, according to which there is no such thing as one language common to ail members of the speech community, but each individual of the community speaks his own language, which, to a lesser or greater extent, is different from all other idiolects.

The neogrammarians went as far as to exclude from the linguist's interests a synchronic description of language, which they identified with a pedagogical grammar. In their opinion a descriptive grammar can be justified only as a didactic textbook.

It is true that Chomsky and his followers make use of the concept of the so-called idealized speaker-hearer, that is, a hypothetical native speaker whose knowledge of language is unaffected by psychological limitations or by variations in situations or speakers (Chomsky, 1965: 4). The notion of an idealized speaker-hearer is believed to act as substitute for the social aspect of language in transformational-generative grammar. But it must be admitted that this aspect of the theory has not been elaborated in any detail yet.

The notion of language correctness is closely related to the concept of language norm. But who is to judge whether a given sentence is grammatical or acceptable; in other words, who is to set the linguistic norm for a given language? The problem is quite important because languages are not uniform. They divide into dialects, social-functional varieties, slangs, etc. Problems of language correctness must be dealt with separately for different language varieties. The linguistic norm in each of them may be different. Forms which could be perfectly all right in one of them might happen to be inappropriate in another, and accordingly, the linguistic competence of particular native speakers may differ considerably. Besides, each such variety is not homogeneous, either. Even if a language were spoken only by a few people, then there would always be some differences of usage among them. This has been proved by dialectological and sociolinguistic studies. Consequently, one could be tempted to follow the neogrammarian way of thinking and posit as many different norms as there are native speakers of a given language.

But this kind of conclusion seems to contradict the linguistic feelings of the members of speech communities. Sociolinguistic studies bear witness to the existence of the awareness of linguistic norms in each language variety. It manifests itself in that people speaking the given variety of a language can easily tell the difference between their tongue and the other's and are eager to point out language mistakes made by the latter.

The degree of differentiation of dialects or languages depends on various factors, such as the social status of the people speaking the given dialect, their education. A special role is played by the so called standard variety of a language if such exists in a given speech community, for instance, Standard English, Standard Polish, Standard French. There can be no doubt that this variety of a given language is its main variety due to the functions it performs. Standard language can be defined as the kind of language used, or at least passively known, by all members of a given speech community, for instance, by all Poles, by all Englishmen. Besides, there is another feature of this variety which is unique in comparison with other varieties: with the exception of geographical dialects, all other varieties of a given language (such as the language of the mass media, the literary language, the language of science and technology, the language of lawyers, the official language, etc.) are based on it, that is, they draw on its grammar and lexicon in their main features.

Let us return to the question who is to set, or rather, who can set the norm for a given language? They are people who have social prestige as well as easy access (such as the mass media, the church pulpit, etc.) to people and for this reason can influence other people's way of speaking. Depending on the variety of language, they may be teachers, journalists, writers, actors, priests or others (for the standard variety of the language), authors of folk literature, taletellers, and the like (for dialects), and so on.

Since there can be no uniformity in such people's language use and their views on what is proper in it, it is quite natural that problems of language correctness

often arouse controversies. The controversies concern all levels of language, that is, its pronunciation, spelling, inflection, word-formation, syntax, and lexicon. They result from changes in language. Changes are brought about by people and some people are more disposed to accept a particular change while other people — more conservative ones — may be reluctant to do so. But it is impossible to absolutely resist any change in language. If this were possible, language would become unvarying, that is, it would lose one of its most typical properties, which is its adaptation to life conditions.

Controversies concerning correctness will always exist. Not much can be done to prevent them. But this does not mean that the linguist should keep aloof from such controversies, the more so because, contrary to what Chomsky claims, people's linguistic competence seems to depend on language schooling.

As is well known, the fundamental assumption of transformational-generative grammar is the innateness hypothesis. Chomsky claims that human beings are innately disposed to learn certain types of language, that is, the ones that actually exist. His argument focuses on the way in which children learn language. According to him, the ability to learn a language is only minimally dependent on intelligence and motivation. Unintelligent and intelligent children all learn to speak their native language. In his view, the child who learns his first language performs a remarkable intellectual feat: in internalizing the grammar he does something parallel to constructing a theory of the language. Chomsky writes:

> It seems plain that language acquisition is based on the child's discovery of what from a formal point of view is a deep and abstract theory — a generative grammar of his language — many of the concepts and principles of which are only remotely related to experience by long and intricate chains of unconscious quasi-inferential steps. A consideration of the character of the grammar that is acquired, the degenerate quality and narrowly limited extent of the available data, the striking uniformity of the resulting grammars, and their independence of intelligence, motivation, and emotional stale, over wide ranges of variation, leave little hope that much of the structure of the language can be learned by an organism initially uninformed as to its general character (Chomsky, 1965: 58).

The only explanation for these facts, according to Chomsky, is that the child has the form of the language built into his mind before he ever learns to talk. In other words, the child has a universal grammar, as it were, programmed into his brain as a part of his genetic inheritance (cf., e.g. 5 Chomsky, 1965, 1975, 1980, 1985).

But, as has been mentioned above contrary to what Chomsky claims, recent research appears to give credence to the opposite tenet, that is, to the thesis that people's linguistic competence is clearly related to language training.

Ewa Dąbrowska (1997) carried out a test in which adult respondents of diverse educational backgrounds were presented with a series of sentences based on examples drawn from recent publications in the Government and Binding framework of Transformational-Generative Grammar. The test was designed in such a way as to minimize the effects of extralinguistic factors such as memory limitations and lapses of attention. The test showed that language:

> performance increased dramatically with educational achievement, with the least-educated respondents consistently obtaining very low scores. An analysis of the patterns of answers given by respondents of various educational backgrounds revealed that the least-educated speakers were also the most likely to ignore syntactic cues and rely on nonlinguistic strategies in interpreting the test sentences. Thus, the results suggest that the ability to deal with the carefully edited, highly syntacticised structures that one encounters in publications dealing with language is acquired in the course of formal education and is far from universal. This in tum raises doubts about the traditional "logical" argument for innateness (Dąbrowska, 1997: 735).

There can be no doubt that linguists possess the best linguistic schooling, and, therefore, belong to those native speakers with the highest linguistic competence. And it is only natural to expect them to engage in problems of language correctness and to support such educational activities as spreading the knowledge of their native tongue, its varieties, its norms, the criteria of the evaluation of its use and the propagation of linguistic forms appropriate to various contexts and situations.

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